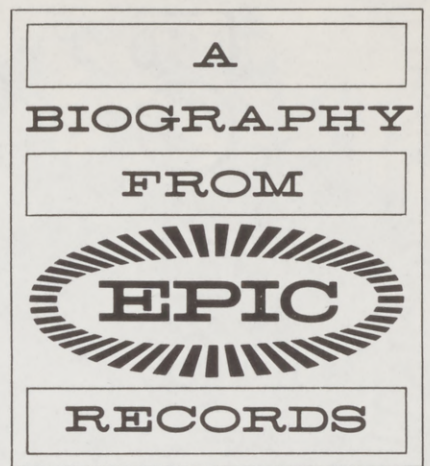




SLY AND THE FAMILY STONE

In New York's Electric Circus an audience is massed between arching light-splattered white walls. The air is heavy, smoky and hot and music falls across the crowd: records known and felt like shared dreams. Songs that tie together a wordless, electric communication, but a communication that is at a low level now, very casual. This audience is marking time.

Waiting for Sly and The Family Stone.

Anonymous men in short-sleeved shirts slip onto the darkened stage to tinker and jiggle and fiddle with the machines.

Pressed against the stage, the audience waits.

Then: A jagged flash of silver tinsel. The glint of a trumpet, the unsyncopated tinkle of a tambourine. The clash of bright colors. Flashes, heightened by strobe lights.

The fuse to the fireworks is burning.

The spotlights are snapped on and cut onto the stage. Sly and The Family Stone are a magnificent line across that stage. They are, indeed, as writer Charles Wright described them, "rock's elegant gypsies."

"Life, Life, you don't have to die before you live." They come on with hippy flamboyance and r&b vinyl funk, the energy level intensifying. Bodies press into bodies and dancing is impossible; from the stage the audience looks to be fields of wheat swaying in the wind. The energy circuit Sly and The Family Stone creates opens up to include us all. We are all young, funky in the heat, touching each other, friends, lovers. More than any other, the music of Sly and The Family--the African bebop chant, the heart-throbbing organ and drums and bass, the stinging lead guitar and horns--is us and we are the music.

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Sly Stone, who was born Sylvester Stewart (March 15, 1944) and still writes under that name, began in the same place most black performers got their start--in church. From the age of four, he was in a family gospel group, and the strong, spiritual coming-together that exists in the best gospel--the yelling out, the testifying, the harmonies of repeated words--all these elements infuse Sly's sound today and are a basic part of the group's soul excitement.

While still in his teens, in the mid-sixties, Sly was a top disc jockey in San Francisco, first on KSOL, then on KDIA, where he was one of the first to break away from tight station programming to play album cuts by Dylan and other artists. Before this he produced most of the performers on San Francisco's Autumn Records (Beau Brummels, Mojo Men, Bobby Freeman) and wrote Gold Record hits for them ("The Swim," "Mojo Man").

Sly eventually determined to get his own group together to perform his original material and formed The Stoners. But The Stoners couldn't put down the sound Sly wanted--that perfect sound he already had in his head--and were disbanded. On his second try, in the autumn of 1966, Sly did find the right combination of talented musicians whose ideas about music meshed with his own: Sly and The Family Stone.

Of its members, only Cynthia Robinson (trumpet) remained from The Stoners. She and Sly had met while both were at Sacramento High School and then at Vallejo Jr. College where he was studying music theory and composition. The others in the Family Stone came in from different directions. Sly's brother Freddie (lead guitar), who had also studied music and still composes, had his own group, playing, as were most of the others, the standard r&b material of the time. Larry Graham (bass) is a cousin to Sly and Freddie and previous to joining forces with Sly, had been performing on organ as well as bass (and singing in his rich, deep bass) with his mother, Dell Matthews, in a small group. Saxophonist Jerry Martini, a longtime friend of Sly's, was into music at San Francisco City College where Freddie also studied and had travelled with other bands. Gregg Errico (drums) is Jerry's cousin.

An entity, Sly and The Family Stone recorded their first Epic album, rightly titled "A Whole New Thing," entirely written and produced by Sly (as are all the other albums) and released in October of 1967.

But it wasn't until they had a solid hit with their single "Dance to the Music"--one of the most memorable dance records in recent years--that the group gained the reputation they deserved. Their second album, featuring "Dance to the Music" and bearing the same title, made it obvious that Sly and The Family Stone were not a substanceless singles group. The soul on that album was miles deep. It was with the recording of this album, almost a year after the group began, that Rosie Stone, Sly's sister, entered, playing electric piano as well as adding another funky gospie/rock voice.

In July of 1968, the "Life" album came out--evidence of still another progression in exuberance and complexity. That winter, with "Everyday People," the group had its first Gold Record single, a hit on both r&b and regular stations. "Everyday People" brought a lot of people to Sly and The Family Stone who hadn't been reached before. And people who were already into the group began to rethink the emerging Family Stone phenomenon. This was a musically sophisticated group whose ideas only were beginning to be revealed, witness the variety and excitement of album and single that followed, both titled "Stand!"

Some of this recognition came as a result of a record released by another group shortly after "Everyday People"--"Cloud Nine" by the Temptations. "Cloud Nine" was a whole new sound for the Motown group and obviously was heavily influenced by Sly's, especially in the harmonizing boom-boom chorus and the use of separate, varied voices. And like most of Sly's compositions, "Cloud Nine" was based on sociological reality (the slums, drugs) rather than on I-love-you-baby. But "Cloud Nine" and the increasing number of similarly influenced r&b songs that have followed it are not imitations of Sly and The Family Stone, they are absorptions of the Sly Stone style. Rather than remaining self-contained, his highly-developed and instantly recognizable sound is feeding energy back into all music. By borrowing this style and making use of it to release new energies, other musicians have pointed up the strength of the original.

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Sly Stone, on tour, had been sitting quietly for almost an hour, in New York's Gorham Hotel, occasionally tapping his feet, when he abruptly looked up and asked, "Do you want to hear it?" Without waiting for an answer, he snatched up four tape recorders and by imitating an instrument vocally or beating the sound out on the furniture, he taped four separate instrumental parts, for horns, drums, bass and organ.

Taking up his guitar and turning on the recorders simultaneously, he played a line that fit jigsaw puzzle-like into the rest. It was a song, a little raggedy, but a fully realized song nevertheless, with every part of the band accounted for. As Freddie says, Sly is always fifty songs ahead of the group: they are stored up in his head.

Says Sly: "I want everybody to understand my songs. I want even dummies to understand so they won't be dumb anymore. And you got to talk to them in a way that they can understand. And those people that get bugged by being talked to loud, then you've got to talk soft; if you can still tell the truth and talk soft."

In the beginning, Sly wrote songs about music and taught us to ride the rhythm. At the same time, reaching us through our bodies, he got into our heads and subtly began changing them: "When you're through with what you think you have to do/ or pursue/ When you've gone where you have to go/ let me know/ I wanna take you higher." While Sly and the group were taking everyone higher, they were also telling us about our life. Groupies. Plastic people. Everyday people.

Now, Sly has moved from songs about personal freedom like "Into My Own Thing" and "Harmony" ("You can be you/ Let me be me/ That's harmony") into deeper themes of social freedom. A few lines from "Stand!" illustrate this:

Stand
For the things you know are right
It's the truth that the truth makes them so uptight
Stand
All the things you want are real
You have you to complete and there is no deal
Stand
There's a midget standing tall
And the giant beside him about to fall

But above all, Sly sings about music and love and he makes them synonyms of life.

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-9-

"Sly, is there anything specific you want to say; anything important we may have missed?"

Sly: "I'm happy."